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# Girls and the juvenile justice system: Community stakeholders recognize gender non-conforming behavior as “criminal” for girls

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## Abstract

Behaviors that guide girls into the correctional environment often pose little or no threat to public safety (e.g., running away). Deeply rooted gender injustice continues to remain persistent and drives girls deeper into the system. Despite continued discussion on improvement of societal gender norms, girls’ deviant behavior is often considered different from boys. In rural communities, girls’ deviance may be viewed as a threat to societal norms of femininity or a product of poor choices. For girls, these non-violent behaviors pave a way into the system and potentially a life behind bars. The current study serves as a contemporary comparison of qualitative responses outlining differences between perceived deviancy of girls and boys among a sample of community stakeholders in a Midwestern state. Results are consistent—girls continue to be held to different, lesser, standards of “appropriate” conduct than boys, creating a pathway into the juvenile correctional system.

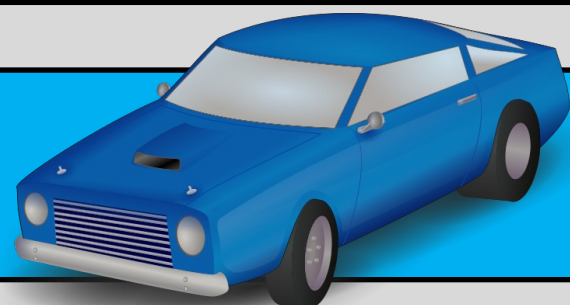
## Introduction

- At times, communities view girls’ “bad” behavior as a continual threat to local norms, including standards for traditional femininity (Sherman & Balck, 2015; Terry, 2019).
- For girls, “bad” behavior is usually the product of victimization (Chesney-Lind, 2006;Terry, 2019).
- Their victimization is then criminalized creating a pipeline into the juvenile-justice system (Saar, Epstein, Rosenthal, & Vafa, 2015)—a pathway different than that for boys.
- As part of a larger project, the current analysis sought to answer the following question: *Do those working with youth perceive different pathways for girls’ and boys’ entrance into the juvenile system?*

## Sample & Procedure

- Stakeholders working in schools, corrections, churches, county extension, courts, or mental health were emailed in a Midwestern state.
- A total of 237 responses from 70 counties (58 rural, 12 urban) were received.
- There were149 participants identified as female, 79 identified as male, with the rest indicating no preferred gender.
- The majority (94.51%) of participants identified as Caucasian, followed by Hispanic (3.8%) African American (.84%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (.42%)

## Qualitative Responses



### What do boys get in trouble for?

“Drugs and alcohol”  
“Smoking, vaping, bullying”  
“Drugs, alcohol, theft”  
“Drugs, fighting, vandalism”  
“Variety of actions, mainly fights and drinking/drugs”  
“Gun-related offenses, meth”  
“Possession of marijuana, meth, criminal property damage”  
“Vandalism, criminal trespassing”

### What do girls get in trouble for?

“Battery, **shoplifting**, MIC”  
“**Truancy**”  
“Booze, drugs, **sending nude pics** that pass around town”  
“Bullying, alcohol, **pregnancy**”  
“**Following behind some boy**”  
“Alcohol, marijuana, **teenage pregnancy...**”

## Discussion

- Previous studies show different pathways for girls and boys with many girls involved in the system for non-violent and gender non-conforming behaviors.
- The current study asked community stakeholders to reflect on the top reasons youth enter the juvenile-justice system in their mostly rural state.
- Reponses are in line with previous findings for boys’ behavior, including those found in the current state:
  - **Boys** get in trouble for drug-related offenses including possession of methamphetamines.
  - **Boys** get in trouble for violent offenses including assaults and gun-related crimes.
- Perceptions of girls’ behavior is also consistent with previous findings:
  - **Girls** get in trouble for status offenses (e.g., truancy).
  - **Girls** get in trouble for sexual behaviors such as sending nude photos and pregnancy.

## Future Directions

- This study was part of a larger project, assessing community cohesion, awareness of victimization, and unique pathways for at-risk girls.
- Future scholars should expand upon qualitative methods whether that be through survey or interview format.
- Researchers could consider comparing these perceptions with official juvenile detention facility intake data outlining intake offense.

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